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ABSTRACT

Decision making is a major characteristic of leadership. The role of the principal in Australia has been affected by changes in education including decentralization of responsibility, increased accountability, restructuring of schools, local selection of school principals, and changed decision-making responsibilities. In this process of change, principals have received mixed messages from the Ministry of Education regarding its support of collaborative decision making and a strong principal's role in decision making. The Beginning Principals Study was designed to examine common concerns and experiences of beginning principals. A varied group of four primary and four secondary school beginning principals from the state of Victoria was chosen for the study. Four researchers visited the principals at the beginning of the 1989 school year and three times during the year. Several telephone interviews were also conducted. In addition, questionnaires were sent to 53 beginning principals. The study showed that leadership was a major concern of beginning principals. Staff relationships, effective school development, and the principal's role in setting school direction were three concerns. Working with nonteaching staff and decision making in relation to the school Local Administrative Committee and Curriculum Committee were other concerns. A similar project was carried out in 1990, with a sample of four principals. (Contains 12 references.) (JPT)

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EMERGING POWER AND LEADERSHIP:

THE DEVELOPING ROLE OF NEW PRINCIPALS IN AUSTRALIA

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 1991.

This is one of a series of papers from the Beginning Principals Study, conducted by researchers from Victoria College, Australia.

Our former colleague John M. Edmonds, who, sadly, died in December 1989, made a significant contribution to the data on which this paper is based.

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EMERGING POWER AND LEADERSHIP: THE DEVELOPING ROLE OF NEW PRINCIPALS IN AUSTRALIA

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One of the widely-recognised characteristics of leaders in organisations is that they make decisions. The way in which they do this and the effectiveness of the decisions made are typically taken as critical indicators of the effectiveness of the leader. However, while the focus is most frequently on the decision-making of the leader as an individual, it has long been accepted that the leader in an organisation should not be personally involved in making a large number of decisions (e.g., Griffiths, 1959). This point has been reiterated by Owens (1987), who has argued: "(1) that the administrator's task is to see to it that an adequate decision-making process is in place in the organisation, and (2) that, because such a process is in place, the administrator makes relatively few decisions personally." (p.267)

This suggests that an organisational leader is able to exert significant control over both the structure and processes of decision-making, and through this and the individual decisions he or she makes, exercise considerable influence in the organisation. A number of writers, including Vroom and Yetton (1973) and Owens (1987), have described the close relationship between the behaviour of leaders and the ways in which they manage the process of making decisions in the organisation.

Sergiovanni (1984) has identified five aspects of leadership relevant to school principals, which he described, metaphorically, as forces available to administrators as they seek to influence the life of a school. These five aspects are:

* technical - based on management techniques;
* human - based on human relations and interpersonal skills;
* educational - based on expert professional knowledge about education and schools;
* symbolic - based on focussing the attention of others on what is of importance and value; and
* cultural - based on building or strengthening school's unique culture.

Furthermore, he argues that these aspects can be viewed as a hierarchy, with technical aspects at the base of the hierarchy and cultural aspects at the top.

This analysis provides a useful framework for examining the emerging power and leadership of beginning principals. It is of some interest to determine what aspects of leadership predominate in the early stages of assumption of the principal's role, and what changes and developments occur over time. Also of interest is the positional power (Hunt, 1979) a principal possesses and the way this power is used in making decisions.

The purpose of this paper is to report some preliminary findings concerning power and leadership from a study of beginning principals in Victoria, Australia. This is done through an exploration of the new principals' concerns about their leadership, and the nature and extent of their decision-making powers and the way they use them.

It is unfortunate that there has been very little research in Australia relating to the work-life of beginning principals. Apart from recent studies (Weindling & Earley, 1987; Parkay & Hall, in press), a similar situation has existed in the U.K. and the U.S.

In this paper a description of relevant features of Australian school systems is provided first, including an outline of the pressures for change which have led to the current context for decision-making in Victorian schools. This is followed by an outline of the Beginning Principals Study, and some preliminary findings and illustrative examples.

The Australian Context

The normal pattern of schooling in Australia is seven years in primary (elementary) and six years in secondary schools. Education is essentially a responsibility of the states and until the 1980's the organisation of these state systems was highly centralised. This centralisation included the key issues of staffing, finances, and curriculum.

However, as in many countries, the 1980's in Australia was a decade of turbulence in education, characterised by widespread and continuing change. Some of the ways in which this change manifested itself are described below, with particular reference to the state of Victoria.

Policy making and control

Following a period of experimentation by schools in the 1970's, governments have become more assertive in the determination and implementation of key educational policies, particularly with respect to curriculum basics. This trend to shift the focus of control upwards from the school to the central government authority (the Ministry of Education) has been accompanied by a simultaneous shift in the opposite direction - devolution of responsibility downwards to regional offices, school support centres, and individual schools. Among the areas of operation which are now the responsibility of individual schools in Victoria are the employment of ancillary staff, the management of building maintenance, and the development of curriculum and associated school-based policies. These changes have meant that principals now report to the central office on some matters, the regional office on others, and the school council on others again. There has been an increase in the financial responsibility and associated program budgeting of schools, all of which adds to the responsibility carried by the principal of the school.

Accountability

There is, in general, a greater press for accountability in education. The development of new state-wide guidelines and curriculum area "frameworks" (though no mandated curriculum) has made this more specifically applicable to the area of curriculum, with schools now being asked to submit to a curriculum audit. In addition, principals will in the near future be subjected to a formalised system of appraisal, although the details of this process are still being negotiated.

Reorganisation or Restructuring of Schools

One of the responses of the Victorian State Government to the falling enrolments being experienced by many schools has been to encourage smaller schools to explore ways in which they may share their resources. This process usually involves a curriculum audit, and in many cases is resulting in schools being closed or amalgamated with other schools nearby, thereby leading to displacement of principals and teachers.

Selection of principals

As far as principals personally are concerned, probably the biggest change to take place in Victorian schools in the 1980's was the introduction of a local selection process for principals of both primary and secondary schools. Through this process, the school council, a legally constituted body comprising elected parents, teachers, and students (in the case of secondary schools), carries out the selection and appointment following strict guidelines and procedures laid down by the Ministry of Education. A special selection committee established by the school council makes a recommendation to the central Ministry, which confirms (or otherwise) formally the appointment of a principal. A similar process applies for the appointment of deputy principals in larger schools.

Decision-making

In Victorian schools the situation in which school decision-making takes place appears to be somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the central Ministry is placing more responsibility for decisions in the hands of the school community in general through mandated collaborative decision-making processes, while on the other, the Ministry's official role description for principals includes the following:

> "The principal occupies the key position in the school and is responsible for its educational leadership and support for its effective and efficient management. The principal is accountable to the Ministry for carrying out these responsibilities."
>
> (Ministry of Education, Victoria, 1988, p.326)

Furthermore, the Ministry has an industrial agreement with the teacher unions which specifies certain decision-making structures which must be established in each school. In general terms, the current agreement has provision for two key committees in each school. Each of these committees is made up of teachers in the school - some nominated by the principal, some nominated by the local teacher union branch, and some elected by the teachers. The principal may choose to be an active member of the committees, or may use the committees as sources of advice. The Curriculum Committee makes recommendations on the organisation and operation of the curriculum, and the Local Administrative Committee (LAC) makes recommendations about key administrative matters such as teaching allotments and declaration of teachers "in excess" to current Ministry-determined requirements. It also monitors how policies on equal opportunity and affirmative action for women are implemented in the school.

A principal may decide not to accept recommendations made by these committees. However, all parties are aware that the committees have been set up in accordance with a policy of collaborative decision-making, that the structures and processes involved are requirements not options for principals and their schools, and that, as part of an industrial agreement, have the support of the key parties. In these areas there are therefore definite constraints on the principal's freedom in making decisions. On the other hand, it can be argued that these structures impose constraints on teachers' individual freedom to argue to not accept decisions arising out of committee recommendations.

It is clear that the presence of these two committees and the influence of the teacher unions are significant factors in the principals' decision-making, and, it is argued, in the development of his or her leadership in the school. An issue of some interest is whether the presence of such structures within an overall industrial agreement is effective in lessening or preventing the debilitating effects of industrial action reported by Earley, Baker, and Weindling (1990). These issues will be explored further later in the paper.

The Beginning Principals Study

A longitudinal study of beginning principals was commenced in 1989 by a team of researchers from Victoria College in Melbourne, Australia. The purpose of the study, which it is planned to continue for five years, is to provide an insight into the experiences of first-time principals. Through the study, the expectations, hopes, concerns and challenges of beginning principals will be identified. One of the key outcomes sought is to inform the educational community as to appropriate research based training and induction activities for principals, and ways in which beginning principals can be supported as they come to terms with their new role. The later years of the study will continue to extend the information base and allow the development and testing of potential support mechanisms for the new principals.

The study is being conducted in both primary (elementary) and secondary schools in the state of Victoria. In the later years of the study it is planned to extend the research to include other states of Australia.

The initial sample of eight principals was selected from the cohort of first-time principals taking up their new positions at the commencement of the school year in February, 1989. They were selected at random from the population with constraints on the selection process to ensure that they were broadly representative of the variety of principals and schools in the state public system. This involved making certain that there were female principals in both the primary and secondary principal groups and that both urban and rural schools were included. Table 1 provides summary information on the principals selected and their schools.

Place Table 1 about here.

Each principal was assigned to a researcher who maintained contact with the principal during the year through regular site visits (a total of four for the year), and telephone interviews every 3-4 weeks. During the site visits the researcher interviewed the principal and a sample of staff members, and on occasions attended staff meetings or school council meetings. The telephone interviews, in conjunction with the site visits, allowed the researcher to follow issues as they developed and also to monitor changes in approach used by the principal. To complement the data derived from these eight case studies, a questionnaire was sent to the population of 53 first-time principals who took up their positions in January 1989.

In 1990 a further small sample of four first-time principals, one male and one female from each of two primary and two secondary schools, was selected and followed in a way similar to that used in 1989. The same questionnaire was also administered to the population of 1990 beginning principals. In addition, site visits and telephone interviews were continued for the 1989 sample, though with a reduced frequency of three site visits and four telephone interviews in the year. Summary information on the 1990 small sample of four principals and their schools is provided in Table 2.

Place Table 2 about here.

Interview guides were used to help ensure consistency of approach and appropriate foci for questions. Written reports were completed immediately following each interview. Planning for the study was assisted by reference to the design and procedures of the U.S. Beginning Principal Study (Parkay &

Hall, in press), which commenced 12 months earlier. Collaboration with those involved with the U.S. study has also provided a firm basis for comparison across the two countries. Some early results from the study have been published elsewhere (Beeson & Matthews, in press).

Power, Leadership and Decision-making in Victorian Schools

Beginning Principals' Concerns

An earlier analysis of data gathered during the Beginning Principals Study showed that leadership was a major area of concern for beginning principals in the first half year of their principalship (Beeson & Matthews, 1991). Further analyses have indicated that this concern continues and becomes sharper during the second half of the first year. The concern over leadership clustered around three foci: (a) concern regarding staff relationships; (b) concern relating to getting the work of the school done effectively; and (c) concern over the principal's role in establishing or reaffirming the direction of the school.

These concerns are illustrated by the following examples.

(a) Leadership concerns regarding relationships

"I don't hide in the office, but I don't want to get too familiar so that people think I might play favourites, and also it makes decision-making hard." (Bill, School F)

"I try to give them responsibility, i.e., delegate downwards. I consider that if they achieve something this will increase their self esteem and that 'something will happen' - at least I hope so. This is better than ticking them off and telling them they are lazy bludgers." (Fred, School G)

With another teacher Fred used a "mixture of the Principal's right to tell the teacher what his responsibilities are, and just encourage him". Reg also noted that some teachers "... just need to be instructed about what is expected and reasonable". (Reg, School C)

Shirley, the principal of a secondary school, reported that she had received fewer complaints about teachers than she had expected in her first six months, and commented that "... the odd parent who has complained about a teacher to me so far has been completely unfounded, and I've backed the teacher 'to the hilt' on every opportunity, anyway. There is no doubt about that, but the ones that you think you might get a complaint about I haven't." (Shirley, School M)

Reg reported in August that, "There are problems in the canteen where there is a little power group operating. There are too many chiefs and they don't want to be accountable to Council." As a result, he decided to attend their meetings to see what decisions were made and why - because <u>he</u> is accountable. Later, in September, he reported that "The power struggle in the canteen is still alive. To take some control back, I've instituted a canteen committee, including myself and another teacher." (Reg, School C, August, September)

"The other teacher I had to tell off for being slack - she was slack and 'off with the fairies'. It is very hard to know how to deal with these people, she couldn't organise herself and often didn't know what day it was." (Bill, School F)

(b) Leadership concerns relating to the work of the school

"It is necessary to ensure that there are job descriptions for everyone, that correct procedures are being followed, that the two major committees -administrative and curriculum - are correctly constituted and work according to the procedures as per the Agreement. I'm doing that bit by bit with the help of the union branch and other interested teachers." (Shirley, School M, March)

"There is a real need to bring the curriculum from the 1970's to the 1990's. This in itself is a huge challenge, because it not only involves the staff (some have done recent study) but educating the parents." (Rita, School K, March)

(c) Leadership concerns over the direction of the school

"One thing that I have learned is that I need to make long term goals and not want everything to happen at once. I need to slow down." (Rita, SchooL K, May)

In the middle of the year Reg organised a public Forum for parents, teachers, and the wider community. The purpose was to address two key questions concerning the purpose and direction of the school: "What should we preserve?", and "How can we make the school better?" This action was in response to criticism and interference in the running of the school which had been the practice of some parents in the previous year. Reg reported that the attendance of 70 parents and their participation in the eight working groups set up "... far exceeded our expectations". (Reg, School C)

At the end of Second Term, Wally reported that "It has been a terrific term. The curriculum policy and the school's goals were ratified by Council. We have restructured the curriculum along 'Frameworks' lines, and we have bought an interim 'art centre' from the R.A.A.F." (Wally, School H)

It is also of interest to note that, in terms of Sergiovanni's (1984) classification, the beginning principals' expressed leadership concerns were almost exclusively on the technical, human, and educational aspects of leadership. The above examples illustrate this observation. That is not to say that none of the new principals used symbolic or cultural aspects as forces in their leadership. They did. However, the use of these was, apparently, not amongst their predominant concerns.

Non-Teaching Staff

Many beginning principals lack knowledge, experience, and confidence in dealing with non-teaching staff, including cleaners (janitors), gardeners, canteen workers. This is exacerbated by the different conditions under which such staff may be employed. Gwenda, the new principal of a small primary school in a country town, (School D) discovered soon after she arrived at her school that she had a nagging problem with a cleaner. The problem would not go away. Resolution of the matter took more than two months, and was only achieved at all because of Gwenda's persistence, rather than her knowledge and skills in the industrial relations area. Its complexity was increased due to the range of individuals who become involved. Apart from Gwenda and the cleaner, these included the School Council President, a representative of the relevant trade union, Ministry of Education industrial relations officers, and the state Industrial Relations Tribunal.

The problem presented itself when Gwenda noted that this particular cleaner was not very effective, and she received complaints from teachers and pupils

about the level of cleanliness of the toilets. On investigation, she discovered he was an alcoholic and, after informing him about the consistent low standard of his work, decided to seek his removal. For the School Council President, a local businessman, the solution was simple: "Sack him!" However, although she felt very unskilled in this area, Gwenda rejected his advice, because of the conditions of work under which the cleaner was employed. Furthermore, the cleaner was a member of a militant trade union known for its readiness to act if there was any suggestion of injustice to any of its members.

After many weeks of negotiations between Gwenda, the union, and the Ministry of Education industrial relations personnel, the cleaner was offered an ultimatum, to resign or be fired. He chose to retire (on medical grounds). A result of all this was that Gwenda received very positive feedback from staff, including: "It should have happened years ago"; and "Good for you - no-one else was able to do it". Even one teacher whom Gwenda had reported she felt intimidated by patted her on the shoulder in congratulations.

Decision-making Within the School Committee Structure

Decision-making in relation to the school Local Administrative Committee (LAC) and Curriculum Committee was a concern which was predominant in the secondary schools rather than the primary schools. The new principals used the committees in somewhat different ways. Two of them adopted a strong decision-making stance themselves. Both of these principals were quite comfortable with the two committees and their operation. (In fact, both had declared themselves as 'a union principal', or 'a union man'.) However, they did not consider the advice of either committee to be the last word on any matter, and reserved the right, as principal, to make a decision contrary to the advice of a committee. In general, such action did not seem to be necessary, in the eyes of the principals concerned.

Two others saw their pro-active decision-making role being played as members of the committees. Their view was, basically, that they would prefer to work through the structure, and that they ought to be able to 'win the day' on arguments in the committees, rather than outside them. They also considered this approach to be in the spirit of the Agreement and the Ministry's expectations. One of these two also considered herself a strong union person.

Other principals tended to regard the committees more as the decision-makers. In their conversations they used expression such as "the LAC made a decision", and referred to having "to put it to the LAC". While such a view did not necessarily represent an abrogation of decision-making responsibility to a committee (especially the LAC), it does indicate an important difference in approach from the first two principals referred to above, although this difference may be a subtle one in practice.

Two examples will illustrate this difference. The first involved an important curriculum planning decision in the senior part of the school. The second involved declaring a teacher 'in excess' - always a difficult matter for all involved.

Example 1. In the second half of the year, the Curriculum Committee was planning the curriculum for the following year. There was lengthy consideration of the proposition that mathematics should be made compulsory for all students in Year 11. The committee decided against the proposition. Bill decided not to accept this advice. It was a matter he felt strongly about, and believed parents wanted mathematics to be compulsory.

He commented:

> "I have gone along with every decision so far, but I believe that staff have to see that the Principal has the right to make decisions under the current industrial agreement. Several of the more knowledgeable staff are aware of this but many teachers don't understand the Agreement. The Curriculum Co-ordinator and the Year 10 Co-ordinator have come to see me and they both believe that I'm wrong. They have been pretty supportive [of me] up to now and I tend to trust their professional judgement. They still feel very strongly about it and I don't like to see them bleeding like that."

Bill also noted that the school had very well-established democratic procedures for making decisions relating to curriculum matters. He believed that what upset the teachers even more, was that after engaging in a lengthy consultative process, he made a decision not to accept the advice tendered to him.

In the event, Bill left the door open a little to be convinced by demonstrated student and parent preference that he was wrong. Evidence that was gathered tended to support the stand he took. Researcher interviews with teachers, including members of the Curriculum Committee, showed that the teachers accepted the principal's right to make such a decision. A typical comment was: "I disagree with the decision, but I accept it, especially as there were only one or two dissenting students. The principal has the right to make that sort of decision" (member of the Curriculum Committee). No lasting animosity towards the principal over this matter was evident.

Example 2. Scotty was faced with a difficult situation in the first six weeks of the school year.

> "On the second day of school proper we found that our numbers were down and so we had to declare a teacher "in excess". This was a very difficult decision. The LAC made a decision but the Faculty [Department] Co-ordinators put pressure on me. I had to inform the teacher which made her very distraught and emotional and she took the position that she wished to contest the decision. She involved the union and things became very tense and the staff generally became very tense. It was very unpleasant situation.
>
> I then hit on a tactic to handle the matter. I said to her 'I want you to be able to stay at this school and we will do everything in our power to make this happen. I encourage you to the same.' By going this way I was attempting to defuse the situation. After all it's not a war we are engaged in. This was a critical issue and point for the teacher and for me, as we were able to resolve the war and break down the walls that were building up around the various participants - the union, the teacher and me. I have maintained this approach."

In contrast, Fred (School G) reported, in his second year of principalship, that in one case "... the LAC wouldn't do it [i.e., recommend what teachers should be named in excess]. "They just left the decision to me." He was quite comfortable with this situation.

Discussion

For principals in Victoria much of the decision making context in the school is pre-determined by the existing agreements between the teacher unions and the government. One consequence of this is that the principal does not have to decide on the structure or processes to be used in major areas of decision making, viz. the curriculum and the general administration of the school. However, even though the definition of such structures and processes has been

described by Owens (1987) as a key task for administrators, at this stage we do not have clear evidence as to whether or not the existence of the prescribed structures and processes makes it easier for new principals to carry out their roles effectively. The principals still must apply a high level of interpersonal skills to avoid conflict and tensions.

The available evidence suggests that those who are learning the leadership role of principal predominantly use the forces described by Sergiovanni as the technical, human and educational forces. This emphasis is consistent with findings relating to the way people react to the adoption of educational innovations (Hall et al, 1973). The new principals in the study were especially concerned with the basic management issues involved in ensuring that their school ran smoothly. It is worth noting here that they were also concerned to ensure that it ran better than it had in the past. However they generally realised that some of the changes they may have dreamed of implementing during their first year would have to wait until they had established themselves more firmly as leaders in the school.

Analysis of the data in terms of beginning principals' emerging power and leadership is continuing. As mentioned above, there are few previous studies in the area on which to build. However, the conclusions of Harvey and Schwartz (1989) that beginning principals to 'read' the culture of their new schools in order to make sense of their experience, are of interest.

In summary, analyses completed to date tentatively suggest that:

(a) the beginning principals interpret and use their positional power in different ways, in ensuring decisions are made about the operation and planning of the school;

(b) the beginning principals are able to operate effectively, though in different ways, within the decision-making structures prescribed, ensuring that difficult decisions are made with minimum negative consequences;

(c) the leadership focus of the new principals is mainly, but not exclusively, on the technical, human, and educational aspects, rather than on the symbolic and cultural aspects. Their primary concern is with the effective on-going operation of the school, and the necessary planning for the following year.

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Table 1: Principals and schools in the 1989 sample *

School	Principal M or F	Primary or Secondary	Students	Teachers	Comments
A	F	Primary	190	13	Well established, prosperous suburb of large city.
B	M	Primary	246	18	Poor public housing area of large city; vandalism rife.
C	M	Primary	280	15	Prosperous outer suburb of large city.
D	F	Primary	209	10	Less prosperous section of country town.
E	F	Secondary	500	32	Outer suburb of large city; light industrial and commercial area.
F	M	Secondary	650	55	New outer suburb of large city.
G	M	Secondary	350	44	Inner, older suburb of large city; wide student mix.
H	M	Secondary	780	60	The major secondary school in a significant, but distant, country town.

* See also Beeson & Matthews, in press.

Table 2: Principals and schools in 1990 sample

School	Principal M or F	Primary or Secondary	Students	Teachers	Comments
J	M	Primary	190	10	Semi rural, residential area on fringe of large city; mid-low socio-economic level.
K	F	Primary	370	20	Well established residential, middle suburb of large city.
L	M	Secondary	304	40	Older, inner suburb of large city; residential and industrial; diverse ethnic mix.
M	F	Secondary	610	55	Industrial suburb of a large city; 15 nationalities represented in school.